

Service Title: Learning to Be: A Service Celebrating CUUL School

Date: Sermon March 29, 2009

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History of Unitarianism

Stephanie Ounpuu

Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we want to be rebellious. “Heresy” in Greek means “choice.” During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Among these was a belief that Jesus was an entity sent by God on a divine mission. Thus the word “Unitarian” developed, meaning the oneness of God.

Another religious choice in the first three centuries of the Christian church was universal salvation. Universalists didn’t believe that a loving God could banish anyone to hell for eternity. Instead, they believed that everyone would be reconciled with God eventually. No person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. Thus a Universalist believed that all people will be saved.

Therefore our religious faith has its roots in the very beginnings of the Christian Church.

However Christianity lost this element of choice when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

This changed during the 16th century, when the Protestant Reformation took hold in the mountains of Transylvania in Eastern Europe. Here, the first edict of religious toleration in history was declared in 1568, during the reign of the first and only Unitarian king, John Sigismund.

In 16th Century Transylvania, Unitarian congregations were established for the first time in history, and these churches continue to preach in present-day Romania. These liberals could not see how the deification of a human being or the simple reciting of creeds, could help them to live better lives. They said that we must follow Jesus, not worship him.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Unitarianism appeared briefly in different locations. A literature was produced which circulated widely throughout Europe. In England the thread was picked up by influential thinkers that include John Locke, Sir Isaac Newton and John Milton. Presentations of these themes by them and others resulted in the emergence of Unitarian congregations in England. These congregations developed through a process of gradual evolution within already-existing religious bodies. A parallel process also occurred in Ireland and in New England.

All these eighteenth-century movements had a direct influence in Canada. However Unitarian organizations here began not by changes in thinking within existing congregations, but by the arrival of individuals who brought their Unitarian views with them.

The earliest Unitarians in Canada arrived in 1811, and settled in St. John's, Newfoundland. The first congregation was established 31 years later in Montreal in 1842 (after an unsuccessful attempt a decade earlier). Services began at the first Unitarian Church of Toronto in 1845, and the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton was established in 1889, followed by Winnipeg in 1890, Ottawa in 1898, and Calgary and Victoria, both in 1911.

Proposals for a National Unitarian Body in Canada were first made as early as 1898, by Unitarian ministers who were serving Canadian congregations. The idea gained strength with the publication of the first edition of the Canadian Unitarian in 1940. Finally, after many discussions, Unitarians from Vancouver to Halifax met in Boston in May 1961, and approved the first set of by-laws that created the Canadian Unitarian Council.

The same year, 1961 our "Principles" were first formulated. These were revised in 1985 after pressure from the women's wing of the UUA to revise the Principles to better reflect the attitudes within the Association.

So in summary,

In a sense our roots go back to the very beginning of the Christian church.

We have our beginnings as an organized religious movement in the sixteenth century, with deep roots in the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation.

Immigrants brought Unitarian Universalism to Canada in the early 1800s and by the end of that century, there were established congregations in several large Canadian cities, including Hamilton.

. . . our principles were first established in 1961.

. . . and in 2011 (two years from now), the CUC will be 50 years old.

[References: CUUL School Binder 2008, History of the Unitarian Movement by Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett, Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith, by Mark W. Harris and the Canadian Unitarian Council Website.]

Shared Ministry Groups

Lee Inkster

The Board sent us to CUUL School last summer with a goal, not only did they hope to grow our leadership skills, they asked that we keep something important in mind while we were there. They asked that we approach the experience through the lens of “right relationship” – with fellow congregants and with church staff. We were encouraged to learn about how “to be” and stay in “right relationship”.

There are many definitions of “right relationship” my preference is the Buddhist inspired one:

Trust & honesty

Truth-telling & courage

Dependability & integrity

Patience.....Love..... Devotion

So I kept that goal of exploring “right relationships” and the Buddhist definition in mind during CUUL School.

During the course they offered us a wide range of experiences from solitary reflection, to engaging in large group activities. They also set us up in small groups that met regularly during our stay - Shared Ministry groups – which gave us a glimpse into how small groups can work in our different

churches. We had a chance to experience it personally and it was wonderfully moving to support each others' growth in groups small enough to really feel that you had been heard.

Reflecting on how to practice "right relationship" skills with one another I came to the realization that one of the important ways we can minister to each other and learn to embrace "right relationship" is Shared Ministry Groups.

So what are Shared Ministry Groups like? Shared Ministry Groups are microcosms of the church as a whole. There is a leader who guides, inspires and brings relevant topics that enable spiritual growth; there are members who are on a spiritual path, looking for a community of like-minded people who minister to each other by being in "right relationship".

What do Shared Ministry Groups do when they meet? First the group develops a Covenant Statement which provides ground rules for "right relationship" with each other. It is a promise that we make to create a safe environment for spiritual exploration. It's a commitment to respectful listening, confidentiality, and speaking from one's own experience (using "I" statements) then at each meeting, very much like all UU meetings it begins with opening words, a chalice is lit and then everyone has a chance to check in, - briefly share where they're at, anything significant since the group last met, or anything personal they need others to be aware of before the discussion starts - the Facilitator introduces a different topic each meeting that engages life, that asks questions that lead to discernment; that encourages dialogue versus decisions. A key concept is to hear each other and just be there to witness, not to try to solve each other's problems but to support each other's self-development then after the topic discussion, there are closing words and a chance for everyone to give feedback on how they thought the meeting went.

One component of small group ministry is to provide a service to the congregation (or beyond) as a way of 'living our faith' and a way to 'give back'. That service can vary from within the congregation to the broader community and from smaller projects to a major focus. Engaging in service is as a way of learning together well as giving.

Shared Ministry Groups are about connecting with other people in the church community while also providing a way to strengthen it. They

provide an opportunity for people to stop “doing” and to just “be”. It’s about creating a place where we can belong and finding a place that can make meaning in our lives.

I belong to one of two Shared Ministry Groups right here at church. I can tell you from personal experience that the members of my group develop our spiritual journeys, in the community of our small ministry group, which enhances our connections, and celebrates our desire to live the seven Principles of our UU Faith and lets us practice right relationship with each other. This, in turn, deepens our spiritual journeys, although I’ll have to admit that this winter I found another way to deepen my spiritual journey considerably when I decided to use shoveling as a spiritual practice. I got lots of practice!

Shared Ministry Groups are a way of “doing church” that deepens our connections with one another beyond worship on Sundays and enhances our ability to be, and stay in “right relationship”.

I’ll leave you with the words of Rainer Maria Rilke:

Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up. If we succeed in loving the distance between us it’s possible for each to see the other whole against the sky.

I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For Leslie Kaye

One of the Canadian Unitarian Universalist Leadership School exercises was to write ourselves a letter, telling ourselves about our CUUL experience. This is the letter I wrote to me as the U2 song “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” echoed in the back of my mind:

July 20, 2008

Dear Leslie,

I hope that someday the Unitarian Universalist movement will develop a deeper focus that people can see and latch on to. I’m still not sure where this “leadership” is leading to.

There were interesting exercises in shared leadership that demonstrated that the end product can be better when done in community than alone, which is hard for a deep introvert to learn. I just wish that I knew to what end this leadership is leading. [Obviously a theme here.]

I still feel lost here. Everybody else seems to have gotten so much out of the weekend. I feel left behind. I know Bill got so energized by CUUL school. I feel a little empty. There is so much that needs to be done. I just don't know how we're going to do it, or if people even recognize that it has to be done and the clock is ticking. Actually, the clock is speeding up.

Leslie

I have been thinking about my CUUL School experience ever since last summer. When, at the "Big Meeting" with Ed Brock of committee chairs, Board, Management and Congregational Health on February 2nd, Mary Eve asked what this church's vision is, I got the impression she's looking for the same thing I am. I think other people are, too.

People in the group referred us to the Mission/Covenant statement, which says:

"We covenant to build a spiritual home, a house of many rooms.
Its foundation is the earth;
its timbers are the Unitarian Universalist principles of belief and behaviour;
its roof is our commitment to one another;
its windows are open to the light of truth and the fresh air of tolerance and respect.
Dwellers here find knowledge, strength and hope.
Nurtured in our home, we are inspired to carry out our mission, reaching out to the wider community..."

This statement is very pretty, very poetic, not surprisingly, as its finished form was framed by Farrell Boyce. But I have always found it unsatisfactory. What does it actually say?

As far as I can tell, it says that our doors will open to welcome people in to cocoon with us, who then, supposedly nurtured by this respite, are "inspired to carry out our mission, reaching out to the wider community."

To do what? What *mission* are we supposed to carry out. What do we have to offer to the wider community?

I can understand how this covenant statement would appeal to the walking wounded. A welcoming house of refuge. I get that.

But, as they say on Sesame Street, “What happens next?”

I would hope that even the walking wounded will someday heal. And be able to move on to looking outside of themselves. I can dwell on old injuries as well as the next person and I know it's not so healthy. But thinkers and therapists have found that healing comes faster and truer when one is engaged in service to others, when one is lifted outside of oneself and stops reliving these old hurts.

So, what will our service to others be?

As you probably know, my own concern is the destruction of our environment through our own negligence. It would be nice to be able to believe, with the Bush administration and other climate change naysayers, that this largest and dirtiest of all the animals can walk through the world without effecting damage to that world. I happen to think you'd have to be absolutely blind to believe that.

And I think that an institution such as ours, comprised of a lot of highly-skilled and well-trained people, could become one of the loci of rethinking, re-imagining, re-visioning the future. After all, if the planet falls, we all fall.

It's *the* underlying issue. Our materialist pursuits drive environmental ruin and poverty and insanity. Maybe our mission could be to re-educate ourselves out of the neo-liberal growth-is-the-only-answer-so-what-if-it-makes-us-all-sick paradigm so that we can actually do something constructive about it? We would finally be being true to our seventh principle: respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. A bunch of individualists recognizing that we are all actually part of a single living entity called existence. Now, *that's* a challenge.

Anyway, that's what I see leadership as being.

So be it.